

Paul Stephens



'I confess to a certain amount of glee when those £2,000 486 DX systems appeared'

OK, the *PC PLUS* Awards are over, so that's enough looking back – it's time to look forward. Space is tight, so I'll waste no more of it waffling, and instead bring you Old Paul's Almanac of Things I Hope Will Happen In 1992.

First, I hope that at least one of the Operating Systems That Didn't Appear In 1991 makes it to the shelves in 1992. Two of the candidates – IBM's OS/2 2.0 and Microsoft's New Technology (NT) – aren't of pressing relevance to most users anyway, so I'm not too bothered. But the third, *Windows 3.1* might make life a bit easier for a lot of people, with its scaleable fonts, better file manager and improved error handling, and what's more it's the most seriously overdue. So I think it would be a good thing if the folks in Seattle got it finished, even if that were to mean taking time out from the mission-critical activity of hyping NT around the industry as the system that will kill OS/2 stone dead.

Next, I hope hardware prices keep falling. I must confess to feeling a certain amount of glee when those sub-£2,000 486DX systems appeared last year, scuppering the old guard's chances of palming off their £3,000-plus machines as 'optimum price/performance packages', and at the same time exposing Intel's 486SX as the marketing tricksters' special it undoubtedly was. The 486SX was intended to kill the 386DX (because rival manufacturers AMD were making it better and cheaper), selling at 386DX prices below the new premium 486DX. Instead the 486DX has moved into the 386DX price slot, squeezing everything else below it and leaving the 486SX stranded at the wrong end of a performance gap that's bigger than its cost saving. In 1992 it should be the turn of the portable manufacturers to stop playing silly beggars and start selling commodity items at commodity prices.

I also hope (fervently) that Borland will produce a proper, object-oriented *dBase for Windows* next year. It breaks my heart to see

all those C++ Developers' Kits going out, knowing that some of them will be used, along with *Btrieve* libraries and other file manager packages, to produce commercial applications. If using a variant of C to develop a sales order system isn't a giant step backwards, I don't know what is. So please, please please, Borland, give us a proper point-and-click version of the world's most decent, honest and hardworking programming language. If not, then please, please please Fox, give us a proper etc.

One rather wicked hope I have is that there will be a sudden rush of keenly priced, ultra-high performance text mode DOS applications, and that the 80 X 25 character screen will become the cult object it deserves to be. Anyone who has seen even a half-efficient DOS application running on a 486 will know that here is the lightning-fast response we all crave – a screenful of text refreshed before your finger has even left the [PgUp] key. A suitably bright spark (probably in Warsaw or Moscow), armed with an old (and hopefully legal) copy of Microsoft's Macro Assembler for the Intel x86 family, could produce true successors to those hand-coded, super-efficient CP/M applications like *WordStar* and *Dbase II*. While the rest of the world got to grips with their mice,

voice recognition and handwriting systems, the fringe army of Hard Cases who still knew how to press a Function key would be enjoying response times measured in microseconds. It's improbable, yes, but it might just happen.

On quite a different tack, I hope that multimedia loses its bad reputation as a gee-whizz, high-cost technology used only by money-no-object corporates and cosmos-blasting gamers. Instead I'd like to see the less glitzy and actually very useful side come to the fore. Still the most impressive thing I saw in 1991 was the talking encyclopaedia demonstrated at the Microsoft Developers' Conference in April – you could read the text like a book, or click a button and see a diagram come to animated life with voice-over commentary, the whole show rewindable using a standard *Windows* scroll bar. The data came from a CD-ROM drive based on domestic hi-fi technology, and the program would run on a 286 PC.

Successes and failures in 1992? Well, the hard truth is that the industry can't go on as it is, with literally hundreds of suppliers all selling basically similar products. If we want to have computers with video-recorder prices and reliability, then we have to accept more of a video-recorder supply side, with brand names counted in tens, meaning a massive shrinkage. If that does happen, then I hope that some of the smaller vendors, who've done so much to bring reliable computing to the mass market, survive, and that we end up with a market controlled by neither the old guard of IBM, Compaq etc., nor, as in the video market, the Japanese consumer giants.

And so on to my final hope. It's that we – you, me, and everyone – will still be here this time next year, still pushing and prodding our PC hardware and software to see what else we can do with it, still, hopefully, getting pleasure and even fun from our computers. A belated happy new year to everyone, and let's all have a good 1992. ●



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